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Does Social Consumption Mitigate Stigma?

Identity Formation in an Urban Farmers' Market

Claire Looney

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**ABSTRACT:** This study contributes to sociology of consumption by analyzing the experience of shopping at an urban farmers' market using ethnographic observation and observational interviews. Participants included market-goers using Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), currency received from federal assistance, as well as those using debit or credit cards. This sample allowed for insight into the process of shopping at farmers' markets while under economic constraint and in turn, the relationship this process has with shoppers' self-perceptions as consumers. The social consumption process of shopping at the farmers' market could mitigate negative effects of shopping with food assistance and financial constraint and promote positive self-making. Though consumers who have not traditionally accessed alternative food movements benefit from this process, it is not accessible to all shoppers. This research implies benefits of widening access to farmers' markets for low-income shoppers, and potential benefits of structuring settings where people purchase food to promote social interaction.

When shopping at the farmers' market, people learn a great deal about the products and the people who grow, make and sell them. They physically connect more to the food and its origins, have more social contact, and access foods associated with a higher social class or a more elite mode of shopping and eating. However, farmers' markets and the alternative food movements which they are part of can be exclusive spaces, catering primarily to white, upper-middle-class shoppers. Prior to embarking on this research project, I conducted ethnographic research in an urban grocery store. My curiosity was piqued after seeing so much of the social side of shopping, and most importantly how much social support matters for food access, especially for the elderly and people with disabilities. I framed that project around a lens of constraint, and one thing that kept popping up for me as I looked at the way people make choices about food under conditions of restriction were all the signs around the store indicating what people using food assistance programs could or could not buy. I remembered hearing stories of people who were frustrated by not being able to buy diapers or toothpaste with their food assistance money, and hearing debates in the news over whether things like soda, candy, and even seafood should be covered by benefit programs. I remembered an article a conservative relative once shared in my Facebook feed, saying people using food stamps shouldn't be able to buy steak or seafood, as these were 'luxury' items that the state shouldn't be paying for. So, when I found out my local farmers' market accepts EBT, I thought about all these ways the government does and doesn't control what low-income people eat. I thought about how going to the farmers' market feels like an elite activity, and in many cases a white activity, and wondered what might happen when people who traditionally might not go to a farmers' market gained access to that space.

The lack of accessibility to the mode of shopping and eating in farmers' markets could further inequity in access to healthy food, social interaction, and a positive shopping experience. This project is a qualitative study of the process of shopping at a farmers' market in a Midwestern city. I examine possible answers to the question: How do personal connection and social interaction affect the experience of shopping, particularly for those operating within financial constraint? And as an extension of that: How does the experience of shopping at a farmers' market contribute to one's identity formation, especially as those operating under financial constraint may be purchasing and consuming foods traditionally associated with an upper-class narrative of proper eating or appropriate food? To address these questions, I focused on a farmers' market because of the heightened social interaction and emphasis on connecting with one's food and where it comes from.

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine how people interact with and are affected by their food purchasing environment and the internal and external constraints they face while shopping. Additionally, I investigate how the shopping experience at farmers' markets varies for those who receive federal food assistance. By examining markets where federal assistance benefits are accepted as currency, I observe how the constraints faced by low-income market-goers affect their decision-making and shopping experience. The environment of a farmers' market encourages a distinctly different process than that which may confront shoppers at conventional grocery stores. To gain insight into this process, I conducted unobtrusive ethnographic observations and semi-structured observational interviews to learn about shopping patterns and strategies, decision-making, and interaction between shoppers, vendors and other employees of the market. For the observational

interview component, I asked shoppers if I could accompany them to observe and ask them questions during their process of shopping at the market.

To examine potential differences based on socioeconomic class and food assistance status, I observed shoppers at a market that accepts electronic benefits for two federal food assistance programs. The Food and Nutrition Service, a branch of the USDA, administers federal food and nutrition assistance programs including SNAP and WIC. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously the Food Stamp Program, is the largest source of federal food assistance and offers nutrition assistance to millions of low-income individuals and families in the U.S. (USDA). The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), serves low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, as well as infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk. The benefits from these programs are distributed using Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), on cards that work like typical debit cards but with regulations on what they can purchase and where they can be used.

I started this research with the hypothesis that consumption in an environment such as the farmers' market that emphasizes social collaboration and interaction could decrease the effects of stigma and stress people shopping with lower incomes may face in food shopping environments. Ultimately, my research supports this hypothesis and suggests the process of shopping at the farmers' market promotes positive identity formation, or self-making, through the experience of buying prestigious food products and participating in ethical consumption. Self-making is the process of forming one's self and self-image through our choice and use of goods (De Solier 2013). Shopping at the farmers' market seems to contribute to positive self-making. However, not everyone accesses this process due to

barriers to access posed by the organization of the farmers' market.

## **Literature Review**

Consumption and the places in which it occurs have the potential to provide insight into the nature of class in the contemporary United States. While socioeconomic class is of key importance to social stratification, it can at times be less immediately visible than other sources of social hierarchy. This level of visibility varies across different social contexts. Consumption may be a way people achieve belonging or mitigate the effects of living outside of the dominant group. Thus, there is an important area for exploration: how do consumption and class interact? The acts of selecting, purchasing, and preparing food are complex social activities, and clearly surpass a simple biological drive to ingest the sufficient quantity of nutrients (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). Many authors have argued that what people eat and their personal and social identities are inextricably linked (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Charles and Kerr 1986; Warde 2015). Differences in the food we eat and purchase constitute a salient symbolic differentiation between social and economic classes. These differences not only reflect economic and cultural inequalities, but can become mechanisms to maintain and reify the hierarchy built by those inequalities (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Bourdieu 1984). Consequently, the practice of consuming food may be a way that people establish their belonging or mitigate the effects of exclusion from a dominant social class.

Places and practices of consumption have important implications for the nature of class. This study explores the relationship between class and consumption, with a focus on food purchasing and its significance within the lens of social stratification. Most sociologists understand food as an element of systems of production, but not many authors have focused on what the process of selecting and buying food looks like. Beardsworth and Keil describe

two main ways in which food and consumption have been represented in the sociological mainstream: the analysis of food production and consumption as a route to look at bigger picture sociological concerns, and the process of asking specific questions about how our food system works and how we allocate meaning to the different elements of this process (1997:5). Based on the schema established by Beardsworth and Keil, the farmers' market would fit into the food system at the 'distribution' stage, while eating is classified as 'consumption.' However, in this study, the idea of consumption draws on its definition as a practice and process as described by Warde, not solely in the sense of consuming food (Warde 2015).

This study looks at the experience of shopping at farmers' markets through the lens of the sociology of consumption. I expand on the conception of the market as a unit within the food system to get at the importance of the processes occurring within that space. These processes intersect with stratification in ways that yield important considerations for food justice and access movements. I use the definition of consumption outlined by Warde as a starting point, as it is appropriate to looking at how actors within a setting of food-purchasing interact with the environment and make decisions about consumption in that environment. Under the framework established by Warde, I analyze the experience as a 'practice' during which consumption occurs. Warde argues consumption is an act that occurs within practices. I look at the overall experience of participating in the market as a practice, while analyzing the organization and constraint of this practice, and the effect of this organization on social stratification.

To better understand the alternative food movement and the importance of consumption within class stratification, I turn to the concept of self-making through



consumption as postulated by De Solier. Self-making through consumption is the process of forming one's self and self-image through our choice and use of goods (De Solier 2013). The consumption of food is an important element of self-making, as demonstrated in a survey of seventeen low-income families reliant on state assistance: families found it difficult to meet expectations for what they perceived to be 'proper eating', and this inconsistency with the dominant food ideology was linked to feelings of not meeting an acceptable standard of family life (Charles and Kerr 1986). Thus, constraints in food shopping may have cultural and social consequences equally worthy of consideration as their nutritional consequences (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Charles and Kerr 1986). Shoppers perceive healthy food as more expensive (Peterson et al., 2010), but the data on food cost perceptions of low-income adults are limited. Thus, strategies of low-income shoppers need further study to understand food shopping perceptions and behaviors of key importance to public health outcomes in vulnerable populations. This study analyzes the relationship of these outcomes and behaviors with self-making in the practice of food consumption.

Using this conceptual framework, I pose several hypotheses on how practices of consumption at the farmers' market may illuminate the interaction between consumption and class. The intersection of class and consumption through self-making has important implications for consequences on well-being. This intersection may manifest through limited access to full membership in a location of consumption, due to lack of knowledge or cultural capital. Different practices in shopping may to a distinct experience and form of social connection, and differences in modes of payment may earmark resources in a way that reinforces social hierarchies.

Knowledge of cultural capital may operate to limit access to membership in traditionally exclusive spaces like farmers' markets. Spaces such as markets within the alternative food movement require specific "knowledge and identity politics" for full participation (Lyson 2014: 1216). Farmers' markets attract and serve wealthier consumers and neighborhoods (Jones and Bhatia 2011). Critics note that the recommended practices of the alternative food movement are inaccessible to many consumers. The movement faces criticism for its presumption of the amount of choice individuals have in their shopping habits. Barriers like transportation, capital, education and time prevent those who are most vulnerable from accessing alternative food practices. Because of this traditional exclusivity of the alternative food movement, it is fitting to examine the act of shopping in an alternative food setting through the lens of constraint. Too often, the alternative food movement refers to 'choice' without recognizing the layers of structural complexity shaping and leading up to each decision (Lyson 2014).

Different practices in shopping may lead to a distinct experience and form of social connection in places of consumption. People buying groceries operate within social and economic contexts and the grocery shopping experience is highly gendered and classed (Koch 2012). In contemporary developed societies, variations in social class play an important role in predicting patterns of food purchasing and consumption (Calnan and Cant 1990). Middle-class women, for example, may be more likely than working-class women to prioritize foods based on perceived health rather than based on their cost (Calnan and Cant 1990). Social contexts create constraints for shoppers and influence their strategies and decision-making. Potential constraints on food purchasing decisions include physical and mental ability, economic resources, accessibility of transportation, and time. Low-income

shoppers spend less on food purchases, though food prices tend to be higher in urban locations, in which there are high concentrations of low-income populations (Leibtag and Kaufman 2003). Low-income shoppers develop strategies that may create a distinct food-shopping experience and distinct patterns of consumption.

Economizing strategies for low-income grocery shoppers include shopping in discount food stores, purchasing less expensive meats, fruits, and vegetables, taking advantage of volume discounts, purchasing private-label (generic or store-brand products) and buying food on sale (Leibtag and Kaufman 2003). In a study of uninsured, low-income, rural adults, the top three priorities for food purchases were cost, taste, and appearance (Peterson et al. 2010). These practices have more to do with “smart” shopping strategies than knowledge about ingredients or preparing food. The strategies focus more on money-saving techniques than on specific foods or recipes. Shopping practices of low-income populations are important because they influence nutrient intake and thus health outcomes (Hersey et al. 2001). A discussion of constraint and barriers to food shopping raises questions about strategies shoppers develop to deal with these constraints and the impact shopping within constraint has on the experience of buying food.

Mode of payment may affect how people shop and the intersection between consumption and social class in places of food purchasing. Historically, the state has directly regulated how low-income citizens spend welfare currency (Zelizer 1994). Social workers created the idea of a “safe” instructional currency for their clients, separating cash relief earned wages and consequently, marking the poor as a different kind of consumers (Zelizer 1994). Poor shoppers were labeled as incompetent consumers who needed guidance to spend money appropriately. This concept of the poor as incompetent has carried over into modern

regulations around state assistance and what can be purchased using these funds. Regulation and labeling, or “ear-marking” of consumers receiving relief could directly affect the well-being of people using food assistance. Heflin and Zilak, for example, found higher emotional distress associated with food insufficiency among those who participated in the Food Stamp Program than among those who did not (2008). While this connection was not conclusive, stigma or constraint associated with federal food assistance programs could have negative effects on overall well-being.

To better understand the relationship between consumption and class, this study focuses on a farmers’ market that accepts EBT. Many farmers’ markets do not accept EBT, which forms a substantial barrier to the use of farmers’ markets by low-income residents eligible for food assistance (Jones and Bhatia 2011). Interventions at urban farmers’ markets that combine exposure activities and small financial incentives can improve the diet quality of low-income families (Bowling et al., 2016). Having the technology to accept EBT can pose a challenge to farmers’ markets, but once implemented, this technology can improve the markets’ use rate by food assistance recipients and increase revenues for farmers. During the time of this study, the market implemented a program called “Market Bucks” in which shoppers using EBT could receive an additional \$10 to use at the market for their first \$10 of EBT spent. A Market Bucks program like that of the market in focus was implemented in New York City farmers’ markets and increased use of SNAP benefits at the markets significantly (Baronberg et al. 2013).

SNAP programs at farmers’ markets have two intended benefactors: the farmers and vendors, due to the increased consumer base that comes with incorporating those who receive food assistance, and of course the consumers themselves who hypothetically gain greater

access to fresh local foods. Markets pose the potential to benefit food assistance recipients by promoting social cohesion and offering produce at better prices Grace et al. (2005) used interviews with food stamp clients to look at barriers that may prevent consumers receiving federal food assistance from doing their shopping at farmers' markets. Most of the participants in the study did not regularly buy food at farmers' markets, citing the following barriers: awareness of the ability to use EBT at the markets, perception that price was a barrier to access, physical access due to limited hours and locations, and inability to find their favorite foods year-round due to seasonal changes. Additionally, participants described difficulties with buying fresh produce such as lacking the time or skills to cook it, concerns about adequate storage space and spoilage risks, and crowds and lines at the market. However, the respondents who had shopped at the farmers' market valued the social interaction, described a positive atmosphere and sense of community, and described the prices for produce as superior to those of grocery stores (Grace et al. 2005). The debates around barriers to shopping at farmers' markets suggest money may be one barrier to shopping at the farmers' market, but other barriers associated with the act of shopping are better addressed by analyzing ideas connected to consumption. While some reports provide insight into the reasons shoppers may or may not access farmers' markets, there has been little exploration of what the process of shopping at markets looks like for shoppers receiving federal food assistance, and what attracts these shoppers to markets (Project for Public Spaces 2013).

## **Methods**

Past studies of shopping behavior have used surveys (Peterson et al. 2010 and Simms and Narine et al. 1994), simulations (Walker and Cude 1983), interviews (Koch 2012; Turrini

et al. 2010), and household food purchase data (Leibtag and Kaufman 2003) to better understand patterns in grocery shopping behaviors. To study consumption, “sociologists typically interview or observe individuals to understand their personal values, objectives, experiences and circumstances and then locate those accounts in an institutional context examined through archival or secondary sources. The basic story is one of individuals negotiating their way in institutional contexts over which they have limited control” (Warde 2015: 118). Gram’s ethnographic study on family purchasing behaviors emphasized the importance of qualitative unobtrusive observation in food shopping settings (2015). However, this method misses the opportunity to follow a shopper or group of shoppers through their entire process, rather only catching moments and snippets of conversation. I expand on this approach to include semi-structured interviews, combining the interview and observation technique to get at both the ‘doing’ and ‘saying’ elements of practice as described by Warde.

This study was able to include both the ‘doing’ and ‘saying’ elements of shopping at the farmers’ market by using a dual method approach: unobtrusive ethnographic observations and semi-structured observational interviews. I visited the market a total of nine times over the course of three months. For the unobtrusive observation component, I observed the sites while participating as a shopper. I focused on interactions between shoppers, shopping patterns and strategies, and interactions between shoppers and vendors and other employees of the market. To conduct the observational interviews, I asked shoppers to allow me to accompany them and observe as they make their food purchases. I asked the shoppers semi-structured interview questions during the process of shopping. I focused on the strategies shoppers use to decide which products to buy, the patterns they follow while navigating the

market, and the interactions they have with vendors, staff or other shoppers.<sup>1</sup> I took notes by hand during the interviews in order to avoid being overly intrusive on shoppers' experiences by recording them. I then promptly typed more extensive field notes based on the notes I had taken.

These methods are preferable to alternatives such as surveys or post-shopping interviews for this study because most research on decision-making and food purchasing has not been able to observe decision-making in the moment in which it occurs, rather collecting data from shoppers when they are not actively participating in the process. I feel certain dynamics and patterns of decision-making were best reflected in the data because these data were collected during the actual process of shopping. I could see the shopping process unfold, hear perspectives on the market, and pick up on details like how shoppers physically interacted with their products and their patterns of movement. For example, I saw one male shopper pick up an acorn squash with both hands, then proceed to toss it up in the air slightly, playing with it almost as if it were a ball, before purchasing the squash. This demonstrates a level of playfulness and comfort with the market atmosphere, as well as the ability for market shoppers to physically connect with their food in a way that may not occur in other settings. By observing and accompanying shoppers at the market, I could see when people approach certain vendors, what draws their attention, and what process they go through when selecting and examining produce.

My sample for this study included adults who were shopping with federal food assistance with the market as well as adults who were shopping without federal food assistance. The only requirement to be included was being a shopper at the downtown

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<sup>1</sup>Prior to undertaking this research, I conducted pilot tests of observational interviews in a grocery store.

farmers' market of a Midwestern city. I selected this farmers' market due to its urban location accessible by bus and light rail train, and because it is the highest volume market in the city and thus also has the highest population of shoppers using EBT. I selected participants after receiving permission to sit at the EBT and information booth at the farmer's market. The EBT booth also provides the service of selling tokens to people who do not have cash to spend at the market, so it was an appropriate place to recruit non-federal assistance as well as federal assistance participants. I shopped with 14 participants, seven of whom used EBT and seven of whom did not. I asked shoppers if they were willing to let me walk with them as they shop and ask them questions about their experience. I provided them with a short explanation of the purpose of my research and only proceeded after receiving verbal consent. I asked all the participants that came to the booth to purchase tokens while I was there to participate in order to guard against personal selection bias.

Using a state grant, the market in the city of study offers a program called Market Bucks, through which shoppers using EBT can receive an additional \$10 to spend at the market for every \$10 of EBT they use. The Market Bucks program was in action at the farmers' market of focus for the first six weeks this study took place, and was scheduled to begin again two weeks after the end of the study. Through the same program, early in the fall every family receiving EBT in the county received a voucher for \$10 in Market Bucks with no purchase required. These vouchers expired on the same date as the end of the Fall Market Bucks program. According to market staff, this program has been successful in increasing the influx of shoppers using EBT coming to the market, and they have discovered many of these shoppers did not know they could use EBT at the farmers' market prior to the participating in the Market Bucks program. This program made the market an appropriate setting for this



research because of the opportunity to learn from shoppers who may not have previously accessed this or other farmers' markets.

One primary limitation of this study design is that it was conducted at a specific point in the market season that may not be representative of the overall functioning of the market. Several shoppers and vendors commented on the difference between the summer season and the fall season, noting the market is far busier in the summer. One shopper commented "people at the market are friendlier when it's warmer." At the same time, the shopper whose epilepsy posed a barrier to shopping at the market when it was crowded said she was less comfortable shopping at the market in the summer due to the crowds. Another limitation of this study design was not including a comparison group shopping at a grocery store.

## **Analysis**

In this section, I present my findings starting with ethnographic observation to describe the social setting of the market, followed by data from observational interviews to describe what social consumption at the market looks like, what barriers may prevent shoppers from accessing or fully participating in the practice of shopping at the market, how shopping at the market mitigates the effects and stressors associated with low income and stigma and finally, how this process promotes positive self-making through social consumption.

### *Setting: The Market as a Social Space*

Many people who visit the farmers' market use it not only as a space to purchase food, but also as a social gathering place. There is a grouping of eight picnic tables in a central area of the market, and many shoppers gather in this space to have a coffee, converse, eat a picnic, or eat a sandwich purchased from the bagel vendor in the same area. This layout changes weekly as employees deconstruct and reassemble the farmers' market each week,

and vendors change by the day and week. The assembly of the market each weekend affects the flow of traffic in the surrounding area, and bus routes that pass by change their routes to avoid the blocked-off streets. Several affordable housing buildings are close to the market, and at least one of the participants in this study is a resident in one of these buildings. These residences are within walking distance, making the market geographically accessible to at least this specific low-income population. Additionally, the market is accessible by a variety of public bus routes as well as the light rail.

The social connection and teaching offered by vendors create an environment of heightened social interaction, something shoppers have referenced as a positive motivation for shopping at farmers' markets (Grace et al. 2005). Vendors and shoppers collaborate on finding the correct change to pay for items and settling on a price, form lasting social bonds, and have mutually beneficial relationships. Shoppers see vendors as knowledgeable, and vendors take on the roles of expert teachers in many instances. Unlike in previous scholarship that frames lack of knowledge as a static barrier to full participation in the alternative food movement (see Lyson 2014), here one can see vendor teaching leading to gains in cultural capital for shoppers as they participate in the process of selecting food at the market, learning about traditionally elite modes of consumption while doing so. The social processes identified in this section and the following sections allow shoppers to mediate barriers of access and cultural capital at the market, allowing them to participate in positive self-making.

#### *Social Consumption: Interactional Strategies and Collaboration*

Vendors answer questions, offer suggestions, and provide positive affirmation of shoppers' decisions about what to buy. One woman was looking for ingredients for a specific

recipe, and asked a produce vendor's advice about what vegetable would be closest to what she was looking for. Shoppers show they consider the vendors to be experts about their products by asking them questions and deferring to their judgment and expertise. One man, picking out a decorative gourd, told the vendor: "I want the best one, according to your eye." Another shopper collaborated with a vendor to try to solve a problem, asking for help: "I'm from Jamaica", she said. "I'm looking for pumpkin - not American pumpkin though. Is this pumpkin?": she picked up a squash cut in half off the table to show which one she was asking about. The vendor replied that she thought the item she had was not what the shopper was looking for, so she moved on. In other instances, vendors affirm shoppers' decisions about their products. One vendor praised a woman buying his salad mix: "Good choice! The arugula's going to be delicious right now." The same vendor explained one of his products in response to a shopper: "The greens are very similar to Swiss chard. They're a little bit... not quite as tender". The vendors at the farmers' market serve in a variety of social roles when selling their goods at the market, particularly the roles of teacher and expert. These teaching interactions occur across gender, race, and class of shopper, but the non-white vendors participate less frequently in teaching behaviors, a difference that may be rooted in language barriers. Many of the vendors who do not seem as comfortable with spoken English do not form as apparent of social relationships with the market-goers.

In addition to collaboration between vendors and shoppers, other forms of collaboration take place at the farmers' market between shoppers themselves. Some shoppers take on the role of teaching. One man took it upon himself to share information with two women visiting the market from out of town, as they conversed in front of a honey vendor's stand. The man enthusiastically promoted the vendor's honey: "This guy sells the best honey!"

I want to get 60 minutes down here to interview him.” This is another example of the social bonds between vendors and shoppers: this shopper referred to the vendor on a first name basis, and when he left the stand he used the man’s first name when saying goodbye and indicating he would see him at the market the following week. Like the woman who insisted her shopping companion buy kale from their friends, this shopper felt an allegiance to the vendor and wanted to convince newcomers to the market of the value of his products.

Shoppers, along with passing on messages to each other about from whom to buy and what to buy, collaborate on shopping strategies and provide each other with social support to be able to access the market. Shoppers give each other cues to establish what they need and what they will be purchasing on a given day. One young man repeatedly asked his grandmother: “What do we need to get? Hey, what do we need to get?” This type of question was common between shoppers, demonstrating that shopping at the market is a collaborative and social process for many people, whether this collaboration occurs between shopper and vendor, or between shoppers themselves. Shoppers strategize about what to buy in what order: “Let’s start in the corner here, get our squash last.” Shoppers frequently strategized about buying squash or other heavy items last.

An elderly woman and her adult female companion provided a salient example of social support at the market. The elderly woman, sitting at a picnic table and facing out toward the activity of the market walkway, seemed to be observing the social aspects of the market while not actively participating due to her limited mobility. The younger woman, returning with a bag with several purchased goods inside, asked: “Did you think I forgot about you?” She then went on to ask: “Do you want any pumpkins or squash, or things like that?” The older woman responded, and the younger woman continued with her mission,

walking with purpose to another side of the market. When she returned with a bag of dried apples, she asked: “That’s it then?” The women agreed that they had purchased everything they intended to, so the older woman stood with some difficulty and they walked to leave the market together. This interaction emphasizes the importance of social support for accessing the farmers’ market, particularly for the elderly and those with impaired mobility. The older woman used a walker and did not join her companion in walking around the market, but could observe, participate in decision-making, and be part of the atmosphere by sitting in the social space defined by the picnic tables.

#### *Barriers to Access to the Social Market Process*

One barrier to fully participating in and accessing the social processes that occur at the farmer’s market is alienation due to the cultural coding and messages around the market and its products. Families on state benefit who were unable to buy the meat that they saw as the centerpiece to a ‘proper meal’ felt they could not adhere to the dominant food ideology of British culture at the time (Charles and Kerr 1986). In modern American culture, food ideology differs from this portrait of proper eating. Cultural values around eating include ‘clean eating’ and higher class tastes are often associated with health and restraint.

“Purchasing of organic and local food may reflect a form of asceticism in which distinction is marked by restraint” (Ward 2010: 309). The ability to conform with cultural standards may have profound implications for whether a family considers their lifestyle to be acceptable within the dominant ideology (Charles and Kerr 1986). Signals at the farmers’ market of focus in this study construct codes around food and its value that appeal to the ideology of ‘clean eating’. One vendor of Korean condiments, for example, tried to attract customers at the end of a day: “Last few samples! Last few bottles of the day! Have you tried [name]

sauce yet? Vegan, MSG free!” These last two descriptions point to a larger theme of how vendors market their products, using language of the local, organic, and clean eating movements. Several produce stands have labels on every item they sell, indicating that these items are “chemical-free.” While this term is a bit misleading, as chemicals make up all food items, the message behind the signage is clear. These labels code food as safe, clean and natural, prominent values of the alternative food movement. Another produce stand emphasizes the freshness of their food, with labels such as the following: “fresh kale pick last night.” Vendors use food ideology terms like fresh, local, and healthy to promote and sell their products.

While these cultural codes around food have real potential to present a barrier based in cultural capital to low-income market goers, the shoppers using food assistance in this study did not seem to be negatively affected by this symbolism. In fact, shoppers seemed to respond positively to these food ideologies, and even to take pride in their ability to access them. One shopper using EBT cited looking for “real, fresh” food as one of her motivations for shopping. She prefers produce “if it isn’t all shiny and pretty,” something she took as a sign of its nutritional value. She, like many other shoppers, expressed that the kind of food she found at the market was totally different than what she could get at the grocery store – fresher and higher quality. It’s important to note that cultural coding looks different in different social contexts. Perhaps, in the case of this market, its urban location and relative financial accessibility make it socially accessible as well. I discuss this dynamic of cultural capital, cultural barriers and their implications in more detail in the discussion of stigma mitigation and positive self-making later in this section.

Disability poses an additional barrier to accessing the market as a social space. One

participant shared that she has epilepsy, and the medication she takes has the side effect of making places with a lot of activity overwhelming. She described the “bump bump” of the crowds, which causes disorientation and “spinning” for her. On the day I shopped with this participant, she said it was a good day because it wasn’t too crowded, so she could enjoy the atmosphere and browse products at the market. However, she hadn’t been paid recently and was frustrated that when she had the money to buy nice things, it was too crowded, and when it wasn’t too crowded, she didn’t have the money. “If I come on a very crowded day, I just get my honey and get out,” she told me. This statement suggests the market is not a one-stop-shop for food purchases, but rather a location to buy specialty items. The market has wide aisles between stands, which seem to allow people using wheelchairs and walkers to access the space. However, participants mentioned it was hard to move around the market with a stroller during crowded times, and the same could be true for people using wheelchairs or with mobility impairments. This study took place during a less crowded period at the market than the peak summer season, and shoppers using wheelchairs and walkers were frequently present.

While all participants of course had a way to get to the market, their experiences and comments illuminate transportation barriers that may prevent others from shopping there. Transportation methods participants used to travel to the market included biking, taking the light rail train, and driving. At least half (seven) of the participants drove to the market, three participants walked from nearby homes, one participant biked and one participant took the light rail train. One shopper who drove typically shops at a market closer to her suburban home. When she was talking about the downtown market, she said: “coming down here is a little more of an event, a doing. Get up, get breakfast or brunch, and go to the market!” This

comment signals that the market is a little out of the way for many people, particularly suburban shoppers. Because of this, and the fact that the market takes place on the weekend, shoppers can see coming there as an entertainment or leisure activity.

One participant shopping with her husband said they would shop at the market more often if it were closer to their house, but it's not a convenient drive and the market doesn't have everything they need, so they typically shop at a conventional grocery store. When asked how they arrive to the market, she mused: "We could spend four hours trying to figure out the buses and trains... I guess that would be a fun adventure." While these shoppers had access to a personal vehicle, this comment highlights potential difficulties in access for those who rely on public transportation. Considering the market does not have all the items most shoppers need, access for those using more time-consuming forms of transportation could be particularly challenging. The possibility of having to carry heavy or unwieldy items on bikes, on foot, or on public transportation also influences shoppers' willingness to buy certain items at the market, such as squash. One elderly pair of shoppers paused to adjust their load of purchases because the squash had started to weigh on the woman's shoulder. Her male companion began carrying the squash instead. This instance points to challenges of buying large items at the market, as well as the importance of social support in managing some of these challenges.

Another constraint shoppers encounter at the farmers' market is buying fresh produce when living alone or with one other person. However, the social space of the market promotes interactions and strategies that mediate this challenge. One shopper avoided buying Brussel sprouts even though she loves them, because her partner wouldn't eat them. A single mother talked about the difficulty of cooking large quantities when she is alone with her



young son. Another man shopping with EBT reflected: “I’m just a single person in my household, so I can only use so much food”. He developed strategies to address this, as well as his financial constraints, such as bartering with vendors: “How many tomatoes can I get for one dollar?” or “Would you consider selling me half a basket?” In this latter instance as well as when bartering with other shoppers, vendors were flexible on the quantity in which they sold products, even if these quantities differed from those prepared for sale. Another single shopper came to the market to buy a chicken to roast, but chose the smallest chicken available to save money and because he didn’t need a big one for himself. Other shoppers who came to the market with a shopping companion could strategize to take advantage of deals they might not have been able to do by themselves, like three squash for five dollars, by making these purchases together. These shoppers asked each other questions like: “Do we want to do the two for five and then just share them?” Vendors encouraged shoppers to take advantage of deals that involved buying more products at lower cost. One vendor told shoppers she wanted to help them get “more bang for your food buck.”

The social aspect of the market also helped manage the challenge of knowing what to do with produce once purchased. A challenge several shoppers reflected during interviews was having the time and knowledge necessary to prepare produce purchased at the market. One shopper relied on social support, mentioning her sister would show her how to cook the collard greens she planned to purchase. The same shopper had a lengthy interaction with a vendor about squash, as the shopper had never tried a winter squash before and the vendor took several minutes to explain the differences between different varieties as well as potential methods for cooking them. He held a butternut squash above his head to express how smooth it was – on the smoothest end of the squash spectrum! She ended up with a carnival squash,

which he recommended as sweet and not too stringy. The shopper seemed grateful for the new information and enthused about trying the new food. The vendor was eager to help – he even sold her the squash, which was marked at one dollar, for 75 cents.

Several participants expressed difficulty in accessing the market while caring for small children. A participant, when asked what she would change about the experience, said she would like activities for her son to participate in while she shops. She described that she and her son are “attached at the hip” and that shopping while caring for him can be challenging. Another mother said she can only come to the market every six weeks because of the challenges of caring for a three-year-old. The morning I spoke with this participant, her daughter was at preschool which she said made it possible for her to come to the market. However, many parents seemed comfortable letting their young children explore the market without careful supervision. On one morning at the market, a girl of about 8 years old was sitting at a picnic table by herself until her brother and then eventually her parents joined her. The girl had purchased honey sticks, which she showed to her mom when she returned, and reported: “Somebody over there was asking for my opinion on these!” The parents showed comfort with their children exploring the market independently and interacting with vendors and other shoppers. This implies that parents who shop at the farmers’ markets could see it as a higher trust social environment than conventional grocery stores. This kind of trust may be important to the construction of the market as a social space that is comfortable for a diverse range of shoppers and that promotes positive self-identity. The challenges of shopping with children also point to the limited hours of operation, as the market is only open on weekend mornings. This schedule may improve accessibility for some who work during weekdays, but also creates challenges for those whose children would be in school or daycare on other days.

The previous paragraphs summarized barriers that prevent shoppers from accessing or fully participating in the practice of shopping at the market, particularly the social elements of this process. There are a variety of barriers, but the social space of the market allows for shoppers to collaborate with each other and with vendors to work around these barriers. These processes of collaboration allow for learning as vendors act as experts and teachers, and shoppers share information and strategies about buying and using fresh produce. Shoppers using EBT are more likely to face constraints while shopping at the market. Shopping with EBT is a reasonable proxy for low-income status, which links to disability, limited transportation, and limited access to child care. However, social aspects of the farmers' market may mitigate stressors associated with these barriers. Additionally, this mediation process may also promote accumulation of cultural capital around food and food ideology which allows for positive self-making. I will discuss mitigation of these stressors and barriers in more depth later in the analysis.

#### *Price, Financial Constraint, and Modes of Payment*

How price is talked about at the market matters because some consumers report not shopping at farmers' markets due to perceived expensiveness (Grace 2005). It is unclear whether price is truly a barrier to shopping at farmers' markets, and reports offer conflicting perspectives (Project for Public Spaces 2013; Grace et al. 2005). When thinking about who finds the farmers' market to be an accessible place to purchase food, distinctions may present themselves based in social and economic class. One shopper commented on the market prices: "Everything's a good deal here except the apples, I think." At the market, there seems to be little conversation about pricing being high or excessive, and in fact several shoppers noted to their shopping companions that the prices seemed low or reasonable. Some shoppers

make price comparisons between vendors selling the same items. One mother and daughter discussed an item at one stand and whether “it’s worth the extra dollar.” The exchange of money at the farmer’s market is relatively informal, and promotes some negotiation about price, particularly based in the vendor’s desire to sell a product prior to the end of the day or the end of the market weekend, and the limited ability to give or provide exact change.

Vendors and customers discuss price and money comfortably, especially when it comes to giving and receiving the proper change. One vendor asked the customer if they had a dollar to make correct change. Another vendor showed trust in his customer’s word when he asked if she had given him a 20 or a 10. She responded that it had been a 10, but she wished she’d had a 20. They both laughed. Another vendor was selling sweet potatoes to a mother and daughter, and he accepted less than the selling price of \$5.50 when the women offered all the change they had rather than the full amount.

Even participants using EBT, and thus presumably under financial constraint, expressed satisfaction with prices at the farmers’ market. There was not a clear consensus on if the prices were higher or lower than in conventional grocery stores. Some participants reported the market was less expensive, others said it was comparable, and several said the market might cost a bit more but was worth it. Many noted the price was not prohibitive because of the Market Bucks program and the \$10 extra they could use at the market for the first \$10 they spend out of EBT.

While being able to use EBT at the market improves access for many shoppers, the use of EBT comes with its own constraints that can create frustration for market shoppers. Many of the participants had positive impressions of their experience with EBT, particularly with the Market Bucks program which allowed them to “double their money”. However,

vendors can choose to take EBT or not, and while accepting the tokens shouldn't be an issue as it could increase profits for vendors, market staff report that linguistic barriers make communicating about the EBT program to all vendors difficult. Some vendors don't take the EBT tokens, and several shoppers stated that this affects their range of choice about stands from which to buy products. The EBT participants would shop until they spent the number of tokens they had taken out for the day, and then their shopping trip was over. One participant was left with 2 dollars in tokens, and used that constraint to choose what the last item she purchased would be. She ended up with 10 honey sticks. Another participant still had tomatoes on his list, but only two tokens: "So I might have to do some bartering here since I'm down on my coins." He could get half the amount of tomatoes in a carton for the tokens he had left. One participant thought she had run out of tokens to buy honey, and said she would buy it at the grocery store instead, showing that running out of tokens at the market doesn't necessarily signify inability to buy the items they planned to buy.

The participants who used EBT set a budget for themselves by deciding how many tokens to take out on a given day and then sticking to this limit. Shoppers using cash tokens would at times stop shopping once they had used their tokens, but several of these shoppers upon running out of tokens returned to buy more of the tokens or used other strategies such as writing a check or borrowing money from someone they shopped with to buy all the items they wanted. This corresponds with research (Calnan and Cant) showing that shoppers without the constraint of low incomes are likely to feel comfortable exceeding their allotted budget while purchasing food.

### *Effects of Social Consumption on Stigma and Constraint*

While there were barriers to accessing the experience of shopping at the farmers'

market, stigma and stressors associated with shopping within financial constraint and the constraint imposed by food assistance seem to be less taxing in the setting of the market. I argue that the mitigation of the effects of these constraints is due to the social nature of the consumption that takes place at the market. How does social consumption mitigate the effects of stigma and constraint? One shopper felt surveilled shopping at her typical grocery store, but at the market, “if you’re really bad with decisions you can walk around in circles and you’re not like on camera with people wondering ‘who’s this crazy lady?’”. Another shopper, whose entire food budget comes from EBT, was effusive about the process of shopping at the market, especially because she didn’t feel safe shopping at the grocery store close to her home. The market differs from the grocery store for these shoppers because it makes for positive social interaction, and allows shoppers to feel safe from suspicion or surveillance.

By engaging with the social resources at the market, shoppers were able to mediate and overcome many of the barriers that have traditionally impeded accessibility to the alternative food movement. Social relationships allowed for teaching, collaboration, bartering, and support that gave many shoppers an opportunity to access the market and its benefits in spite of potential barriers. Existing theory about the alternative food movement considers the symbolic effect of cultural capital without much consideration for the varying effects of the social context in which the symbolic gets negotiated. Cultural coding can look different in different cultural contexts, and at the market, there seem to be social processes taking place that reduce the exclusivity of this cultural coding. The social nature of the space mitigates barriers for many shoppers, and my findings not only support the sense of positive atmosphere and sense of community noted by respondents to Grace et al., but they also let us

look at how an environment that encourages this atmosphere is constituted and created. This research reveals the embodied practices of the farmers' market that lead low-income consumers to describe their experience of the market as such, a process that occurs via stigma mitigation and positive self-making.

#### *Positive Self-Making at the Farmers' Market*

When shoppers can access the social and cultural processes of shopping at the farmers' market, they participate in positive self-making through consumption. Their consumption of food they perceive as healthy and ethical allows for positive perceptions of themselves as well as the shopping experience itself. Shopping at the farmers' market could mitigate risks of stigma or stress associated with shopping within constraint. The market provides opportunities for personal connections with local products, social contact with other shoppers and food vendors, and access to foods typically associated with "high class" goods and cultural or social status.

Positive self-making at the market is able to occur because of a class-leveling effect that occurs in the social space constructed there. Although previous research has noted exclusivity in farmers' markets (Lyson), low-income consumers in this study found the market to be fairly inclusive. This diverges from findings that have noted how higher-class food practices can generate negative self-feelings in low-income consumers. In fact, instead of experiencing negative self-feelings, low-income consumers at the market are able to use the social resources of the market to access the symbolic resources of high prestige food and ethical consumption. Shoppers using EBT frequently refer to the food they purchase at the market as "fresh," "real," or as generally of higher quality than food at conventional grocery stores, making reference to the elite quality of food they can buy there. Comments like "you

don't see this stuff unless you come down here" were frequent among shoppers using EBT. One woman mentioned preferring to purchase food that still looked "dirty," considering this to be an indication of its freshness. Market-goers are able to access elite symbolic resources because of the social resources the market space provides in the form of support, teaching, and collaboration. Because farmers and vendors are positioned as experts, purchasing choices by individuals become less of a way to distinguish oneself as elite. Most individuals show deference to the vendors as experts, subduing the disparity in cultural capital that may be more prominent in other alternative food spaces. A class-leveling effect allows this process to take place by reducing signals of obvious class difference.

Markers of class difference are somewhat subdued at the farmers' market, which creates a foundation upon which stigma mitigation and positive self-making can occur. Shoppers at the market are all purchasing elite goods, which eliminates the capacity for class-based food distinctions formed by choosing between brands or quality of product. Additionally, class differences are not easily distinguishable at the market because social norms around clothing are more relaxed. Vendors and employees of the market dress casually, and even outlandishly at times, as in the cases of the vendor with a long feather in his cap and the honey vendor with a bee-shaped hat. Clothing typically associated with farming or work clothes are common, and many vendors wear flannel shirts, aprons, or sweatshirts. Customers wear a wide range of clothing, many choosing to wear very casual clothing like athletic clothing, shorts, baseball caps, flip flops, and work uniforms. This is not to say that there is not class distinction rooted in clothing at the market, but the open-air feeling of the space seems to lend itself to a relaxed norm for self-presentation. At one point a man who seemed to be experiencing homelessness entered the market, and vendors seemed



happy to engage with him and discuss their products in spite of his outward appearance. He had an extended conversation about different types of cheeses with one vendor. Because of this class-leveling effect at the market, shoppers are able to access the cultural capital associated with ethical consumption and elite symbolic resources.

Ideologies of ethical consumption are most strongly associated with upper-middle class culture, and in many cases this form of consumption can be expensive and difficult to access. However, at the market it seems to be relatively affordable and accessible. Low-income shoppers were able to practice ethical consumption in the market context, and in doing so could access and accrue a certain form of cultural capital by engaging in this practice. Many participants, both using EBT and not using EBT, reflected ideals of ethical consumption when discussing market prices. Willingness to spend a bit more to support local farmers was common in the observational interviews. One shopper bought a carton of eggs, and then saw another carton of eggs nearby that cost less. He pointed this out and said: “I don’t mind. I’m contributing to the farmers.” Even though this shopper relies on federal assistance for his food budget, and faces quite a bit of financial constraint, he places a high value on participating in the market and supporting its vendors. Shoppers such as this individual gain a sense of empowerment by participating in what they perceive to be ethical consumption.

By learning vocabulary and skills related to selecting, buying and preparing food associated with dominant food ideology and ethical consumption, shoppers gain cultural capital around food and food consumption. Market interactions such as teaching, collaboration, and bartering can have a mediating effect on barriers to accessing the market and deficits of cultural capital, particularly those that affect low-income and low-access

shoppers. These ‘teaching’ behaviors come to form a transference of elite knowledge about food, mitigating stigma and the deficit of access to this form of cultural capital and allowing shoppers who have traditionally not had access to elite food spaces to participate in positive self-making. The potential for stigma mitigation in combination with positive self-making lends weight to the notion that negative effects on overall well-being associated with use of federal food assistance as found in prior research (Heflin and Zilak 2008) are linked to stigma, at least in part.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, positive outcomes accompany shopping at the farmers’ market. The market could lead to a better shopping experience, increased access to foods perceived to be of high quality and health value, education about new and different foods, accumulation of cultural capital around food ideology, and feelings of social cohesion. These benefits contribute to positive identity formation and may mitigate the effects of stigma and social stressors. While this work is not intended to reinforce the idea that there is only one form of “proper eating,” it is based in the principle that people should have access to the kind of food they want to buy and eat, and that buying and eating this food should be a positive experience. This research is important because it points to what can happen when shoppers with limited financial resources access a style of shopping and eating that has traditionally been exclusive. By looking at the experience of people shopping at farmers’ markets, we learn it not only can be educational and can lead to people getting some great fresh food, but it can create the opportunity for a shift in how people see themselves and their identities as shoppers and eaters.

Though shoppers at the farmers' market use the market in a variety of ways, their use of the space for social interaction and self-making through consumption is the most salient. This study examined the process of consumption within constraint at a farmers' market through qualitative methods including participant observation and observational interviews. The primary areas of focus for these methods were strategies that shoppers use to decide which products to buy, the patterns they follow while navigating the market, the interactions they have with vendors, staff or other shoppers, and overall perceptions of the experience of shopping at the farmers' market. These findings have implications for programming that seeks to attract or retain low-income shoppers and shoppers who use SNAP and WIC benefits to farmers' markets.

Because of the relatively small sample size and limited length of the study there are some limitations to its generalizability. For instance, I was not able to recruit shoppers who were not proficient in English. One shopper who approached the EBT booth while I was seated there did not speak very much English, and I was unable to communicate the nature of my research to get consent for an interview. I did not encounter any other shoppers of limited English proficiency. Linguistic barriers may have significant influence on shopping at the farmers' market, particularly when the experience is based on interaction with vendors. This interaction between shoppers and vendors was essential to many of the social processes taking place at the market. Further research could address the disparity language barriers may present by looking at farmers' markets organized to appeal more to specific ethnic or cultural groups. Of course, there is also the limitation to the conclusions stemming from the fact that this sample is drawn from people who shop at farmers' markets, thus not providing a lot of insight into why some shoppers do not come to the market at all.

This study suggests several potential benefits of access to the farmers' market as a social space including a more positive shopping experience, increased access to foods perceived to be of high quality and high health value, education about new and different foods, and feelings of social cohesion. These benefits contribute to positive self-making through perceived ethical consumption and knowledge-based leisure. However, several barriers prevent shoppers from experiencing the market in this way or from accessing the market at all. These barriers include linguistic inaccessibility, challenges of access for people with physical and mental disabilities, limited hours and days of service, lack of transportation, financial constraints, and constraints on which stands shoppers with EBT can buy from. Linguistic barriers are an area of importance for further investigation. One surprising finding of this study was that the limitations on EBT extend beyond the federal regulations, and many of these limitations seem to stem from linguistic barriers between the organizational staff of the farmers' market and the vendors. Potential strategies for improvement could address communication between the market staff and vendors, as well as communication with shoppers about EBT and programs like Market Bucks.

In addition to its important implications for widening access to farmers' markets, the idea of social consumption could guide how public health advocates plan programs to improve the experience and health outcomes of low-income shoppers. Because farmers' markets are not one-stop-shops for most, stores that sell staple grocery items could be designed to promote connection with food and social interaction in similar ways to farmers' markets. The contrast, for example, between buying food from a friendly farmers' market vendor and buying food at a self-checkout kiosk at a grocery store is striking. The most enjoyable part of this project was walking through the market with my participants who were

‘regulars’, who could greet different vendors by name and check in about things like how that baby shower went, or what ended up being served for that big birthday dinner. It made me want to be a part of that community, to know exactly who collected and packaged my eggs instead of just grabbing them from a grocery store fridge with a person hidden behind it. Potential directions for policy and interventions based in this research include promoting social outings to grocery stores, providing child care for those who wish to shop at the farmers’ market, or stationing experts at grocery stores who engage shoppers in conversations about unfamiliar fresh foods or ways to prepare fruits and vegetables.

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